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National Institute on Aging

Age Page

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Food: Staying Healthy After 65

Diet is important to people of all ages, but older people in particular may have questions about what they should eat to maintain their health. Because many health problems of the elderly are the result of poor nutrition, the following guidelines may help older people plan a healthy diet.

Most people gain weight more easily as they grow older, but they need the same amounts of most nutrients (vitamins, minerals, and protein) as younger people. This means that the elderly in particular should eat nutritious food and cut down on sweets, salty snack foods, high-calorie drinks, and alcohol.

Exercise is also important in keeping off extra pounds. A person who is exercising regularly can eat more without gaining weight than a person who sits most of the day.

Eating too little can be harmful as well. People who do not eat enough may have less energy; they may become lonely and depressed. In addition, a diet containing too few calories is also likely to be lacking in vitamins and minerals.

Older people should talk with their doctors about their eating habits, especially if they have any illnesses that might require changes in what or how much they eat. This is important because some drugs can interact with certain foods and change the effects of the medications, and other drugs can alter nutritional needs.

Nearly everyone has heard that it is important to eat a "well-balanced" diet that provides adequate vitamins, minerals, protein, and carbohydrates. Such a diet is rich in fresh vegetables (especially leafy greens), fresh fruits, low-fat dairy products, beans and/or meat, and whole grains. Eating these kinds of foods will help reduce the amount of fat and salt in the diet. Too much fat and salt may contribute to heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke.

Vitamins and Minerals

A healthy body needs vitamins and minerals, which are found in fruits, vegetables, meats, dairy products, and cereals. Many older persons do not get enough calcium, a mineral that is used by the body in many ways. Calcium is especially important for building and maintaining strong bones and teeth. Foods rich in calcium include not only milk and cheese but also dark leafy greens (kale, collard, turnip, and mustard greens). Some seeds, legumes, and nuts (sesame seeds, beans, and almonds) also supply good amounts of calcium.

Protein

The body requires protein to build and maintain muscle tissue. All adults need about the same amount of protein-rich foods: two servings a day. One serving would include 2-3 ounces of red meat, chicken, or fish; two eggs; 1 cup of cooked dry beans; 4 tablespoons of peanut butter; or 1/2 cup of nuts. Dairy products also contain protein and can be used to increase the value of other protein sources such as cereals, beans, and nuts.

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Fat and Carbohydrate

Energy is obtained from fats and carbohydrates, but it is important to eat fat- and carbohydrate-rich foods that also contain vitamins, minerals, or protein. This means eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grain or enriched flour products, beans, rice, and rolled oats. Candy, pie, cake, and other dessert foods should be limited. The best snack foods are plain vegetables and fruits, which are high in vitamins and low in calories, fats, sugar, and salt.

Whole unrefined grains are recommended because the refining process markedly decreases the amount of B vitamins (only three of which are added to enriched flour), vitamin E, and trace minerals. Whole grain foods include whole wheat breads and cereals, oatmeal, whole wheat or rye crackers, barley, brown rice, and cornmeal.

Fiber

The refining process also removes the bran, an important source of fiber in the diet. Although the role of fiber is not fully known, it can help in avoiding constipation. Too much bran, however, can prevent the body from absorbing some minerals. Therefore, eating whole grain breads and cereals and plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits is a better way to add fiber to the diet than adding bran to cereal or other foods.

Towards the Future

Scientists supported by the National Institute on Aging are studying nutrient intake and requirements in the elderly, changes in taste and smell with aging, behavioral aspects of dietary habits, and the influence of nutrition on health in old age. Through such research we hope to gain a better understanding of how diet and the aging process affect one another.

For further information about nutrition and aging, please call Judy Fernandes at (301) 496-1752 or write to the Information Office, National Institute on Aging, Bethesda, Md. 20205.

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